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Mr. Gray and Mr. Meany: Old Quotes Remembered

What looked like a political romance between President Nixon and AFL-CIO President George Meany now is subject to additional strain. The strain grows out of the controversial nomination of L. Patrick Gray III to be director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Just about a year ago (on March 24, 1972), Gray, then assistant attorney general, hit Meany with all the rhetorical clout at his command. Because Meany and other union leaders had walked off the Pay Board, Gray pronounced this verdict on Meany:

"Not since the so-called Robber Barons of the 19th century has a special interest group demonstrated such blatant contempt for the public interest."

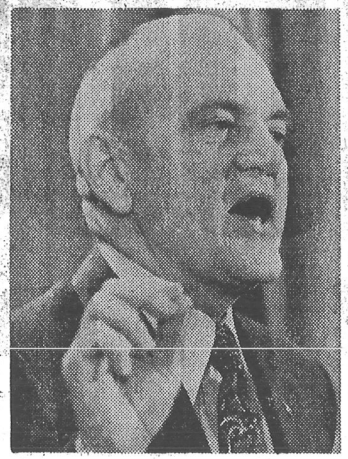
Except for the then Treasury Secretary John B. Connally, and the White House press office, Meany had not been so severely chastised by a top administration official before. Gray charged Meany with refusal to cooperate to break the "back of the psychological as well as the real inflation." Cooperation, he said, was practically universal except for the "likes of Mr. Meany."

"While I am not here to throw bouquets at business," he told a businessmen's audience, "I must observe that the management representatives on the Pay Board did not come in with their fingers crossed. They did not hang onto their hats and keep one foot outside the door."

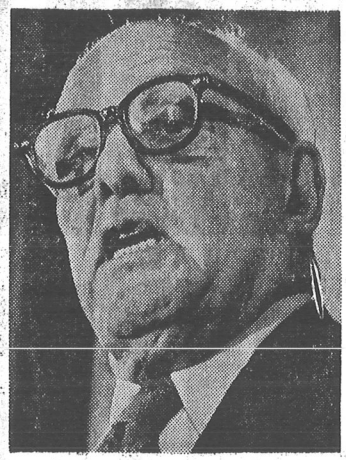
To those inside the trade union movement, Gray's indictment of Meany suggested a deep anti-union bias. He ridiculed Meany's explanation for taking a "walk" from the Pay Board in early 1972:

"He didn't say, 'the public be damned.' But he said that he and his colleagues had a 'deep disbelief and distrust of the aims and purposes of this administration's economic and social policies . . .' It's not really a matter of trust with Mr. Meany—it's a question of power—the raw and unbridled power to pull the strings and manipulate to achieve his own objectives and the public be damned."

Then, Gray cracked Meany on a more sensitive nerve: "In my opinion the American labor movement has the right to expect reasoned and responsible leadership from the chieftains. Instead it has now received a buckshot load of irrational irresponsibility . . . The working man and his family deserve the responsible representation that the AFL-CIO potentates may have been able to provide had they placed public interest above self-interest and raw power."



L. Patrick Gray III



George Meany

Quite obviously Gray was faithfully reflecting the orthodox anti-Meany line of the Nixon administration at that time. How could he have known that his indignation against the "potentates of labor" would in a very short time be considered indiscrete?

In June, the President named Gray acting FBI director. How could Gray have known that in July, Meany would pronounce his "non-endorsement" policy in the presidential campaign or that by the end of the year, the political bedfellowship of President Nixon and Meany was reaching its greatest intensity? Just a month ago, the President himself appeared in Florida before the "Potentates of Labor," in executive council assembled. Meany was hailed by the President and the Treasury Secretary as a "labor statesman," a "responsible representative" of the union membership, and a powerful ally. So where does that leave Gray?

It is unlikely that Meany will appear before the Senate Judiciary Committee to express his doubts about the fitness and non-political character of Gray. Thus far, the only important labor protest has come from the independent United Auto Workers through its general counsel, Stephen Schlossberg. He warned that "if the head of the FBI . . . used the awesome apparatus under his control to further the political aims of a president, the democratic society is in danger."

By this time, of course, President Nixon may have already decided that Gray is expendable because of his unsettling candor. The White House may have concluded that dropping Gray would be therefore to bestow a fringe benefit upon Meany and his associates, which could produce dividends of gratitude for the administration in the legislative struggle ahead.